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The Voices of Washington's Legal Community



Law Firm Diversity: Key Findings from the 2019 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms

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For the first time since the Great Recession, the legal profession hit a milestone for diversity in 2019. While the demographic makeup of partners, associates, and other career-trajectories for lawyers has become more diverse—for the most part—progression to a more representative legal profession has been slow at best.

In its 2019 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms, an annual compilation of legal employer data, the National Association of Law Placement (NALP) highlighted a number of noteworthy data points, but overall found that the profession is making only incremental progress. Key among its findings, the NALP reported that the percentage of African American associates finally eclipsed the previous high in 2009.

“While that is a positive sign, it is barely so, and it strikes me as somewhat of a tragedy that it has taken more than 10 years to achieve such a meager benchmark, and it is notable that the number remains well below 5 percent,” NALP Executive Director James Leipold wrote in the 2019 report’s commentary and analysis.

With some of its data dating back as far as 1993, the NALP collected employment information from over 108,500 partners, associates, and other lawyers across 979 offices, as well as 7,000 summer associates in 668 offices. Overall, the NALP report paints a picture of “slow incremental gains” in the representation of historically underrepresented demographic groups.

“I have become convinced that despite steady gains, great structural and cultural hurdles remain that prevent law firms from being able to measure more rapid progress in increasing diversity, particularly among the partnership ranks,” Leipold wrote.

African American Representation Reaches Minor Milestone

The key data trend the NALP highlights is that for the first time since 2009, African American lawyers accounted for more than 4.66 percent of associates, and made up 4.76 percent of the share in 2019. African American representation among associates stalled in 2009 when the demographic trend was “interrupted by some recession era setbacks,” according to the report, then began to increase again although “at a rate so slow as to almost seem imperceptible at times.”

Women of Color Most Underrepresented

Although there was a greater representation of African American associates in 2019 compared to 2009, African American *women* actually made up a smaller percentage of associates, accounting for 2.8 percent of associates this year and 2.93 percent in 2009.

Women of color “continued to be the most dramatically underrepresented group at the partnership level,” according to the NALP.

Women and People of Color Disproportionately Exiting Firms

Women and people of color are “well represented” at law schools and among summer associates; however, they are also leaving “the lawyer ranks at law firms at a higher rate than white men.”

Since 2000, according to the ABA, women have made up about 46-50 percent of law school graduates and people of color 20-31 percent. Among the career lawyers at the firm level, however, women represented only about 36 percent and people of color represented just about 17 percent.

LGBT Representation Continues to Grow

Although the representation of LGBT lawyers ticked up only a fraction of a percentage (from 2.86 percent in 2018 to 2.99 percent in 2019), the percentage of LGBT lawyers has been increasing year over year since 2002. Most significantly this year, there was a 1.1 percent increase of LGBT summer associates.

Disabilities Remain Underreported

The NALP collects information about lawyers with disabilities, but reported that its data is lacking compared to other demographic information, making it difficult to draw any conclusions or trends. In 2019, less than one-half of 1 percent of partners reported having a disability.

Seattle Among Highest Percentage of Women Partners

Among major U.S. cities, Seattle and San Francisco firms reported the highest percentage of women partners. Other cities, like Miami, reported more people of color in partnership positions (35 percent) than any other city by far.

NALP data was only available for two cities in the northwest: Seattle and Portland. For Seattle area firms, 29.73 percent of partners and 46 percent of associates were women; 10.7 percent of partners and 27.64 percent of associates were people of color. Portland firms reported 26.26 percent of partners and 48.02 percent of associates were women, and 6.37 percent of partners and 16.95 percent of associates were people of color.

WSBA Demographics Compared to National Trends

According to the WSBA's own regular membership demographic surveys, since 2006 the legal profession in Washington has shifted from nearly two-thirds male to now slightly more in line with demographics of the state as a whole (about 50/50 male/female, according to the [Washington Office of Financial Management](#)), with about 58 percent of responding members

reporting their gender as male, 42 percent as female, and less than one-tenth of one percent as non-binary, not listed, multi-gender, transgender, or two spirit, according to the most recent [WSBA Member Statistics](#) in December 2019.

The WSBA first began collecting gender and ethnicity data about its members in 2006. Comparing 2006 to 2019, the ethnic makeup of WSBA members has shifted from about 93 percent to 85 percent white/European descent, 1.9 percent to 2.3 percent black/African American/African descent, and 1.6 percent to 2.4 percent Latinx, and 1.6 percent to 3.4 percent multiracial. (No information was reported for other ethnicities in 2006.)

About the Author



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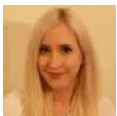
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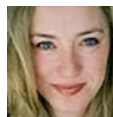
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